

# The Seizure of Jerusalem As Told By Ibn Al-Athir (Early Thirteenth Century)

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Ibn Al-Athir (1160-1233) was an Arab historian who drew on earlier accounts for this recounting of the crusaders' conquest of Jerusalem. He stresses the greed and impiety of the crusaders, who pillaged Muslim holy places, and their pitiless slaughter.

## **Origin of the Franks' Attack on Islam**

The power of the Franks first became apparent when in the year 478H they invaded the territories of Islam and took Toledo and other parts of Andalusia, as was mentioned earlier. Then in 484H they attacked and conquered the island of Sicily and turned their attention to the African coast. Certain of their conquests there were won back again but they had other successes, as you will see.

In 490H the Franks attacked Syria. This is how it all began: Baldwin, their King, a kinsman of Roger the Frank who had

conquered Sicily, assembled a great army and sent word to Roger saying: "I have assembled a great army and now I am on my way to you, to use your bases for my conquest of the African coast. Thus you and I shall become neighbors."

Roger called together his companions and consulted them about these proposals. "This will be a fine thing both for them and for us!" they declared, "for by this means these lands will be converted to the Faith!" At this Roger raised one leg and farted loudly and swore that it was of more use than their advice. "Why?" "Because if this army comes here, it will need quantities of provisions and fleets of ships to transport it to Africa, as well as reinforcements from my own troops. Then, if the Franks succeed in conquering this territory they will take it over and will need provisioning from Sicily. This will cost me my annual profit from the harvest. If they fail they will return here and be an embarrassment to me here in my own domain. As well as all this Tamim will say that I have broken faith with him and violated our treaty, and friendly relations and communications between us will be disrupted. As far as we

are concerned, Africa is always there. When we are strong enough we will take it."

He summoned Baldwin's messenger and said to him: "If you have decided to make war on the Muslims your best course will be to free Jerusalem from their rule and thereby win great honor. I am bound by certain promises and treaties of allegiance with the rulers of Africa." So the Franks made ready and set out to attack Syria.

Another story is that the Fatimids (Shiite Government) of Egypt were afraid when they saw the Seljuquids extending their empire through Syria as far as Gaza, until they reached the Egyptian border and Atsiz invaded Egypt itself. They therefore sent to invite the Franks to invade Syria and so protect Egypt from the Muslims. But God knows best.

### **The Finding of the Holy Lance and the Battle at Antioch**

When Kerbogha heard that the Franks had taken Antioch he mustered his army and advanced into Syria... All the Turkish and Arab forces in Syria rallied to him except for the army from Aleppo... When the Franks heard of this they

were alarmed and afraid, for their troops were weak and short of food. The Muslims advanced and came face to face with the Franks in front of Antioch. Kerbogha, thinking that the present crisis would force the Muslims to remain loyal to him, alienated them by his pride and ill-treatment of them. They plotted in secret anger to betray him and desert him in the heat of battle.

After taking Antioch the Franks camped there for twelve days without food. The wealthy ate their horses and the poor ate carrion and leaves from the trees. Their leaders, faced with this situation, wrote to Kerbogha to ask for safe-conduct through his territory but he refused, saying "You will have to fight your way out."... There was also a holy man [among the Franks] who had great influence over them, a man of low cunning, who proclaimed that the Messiah had a lance buried in the Qusyin, a great building in Antioch. "And if you find it you will be victorious and if you fail you will surely die." Before saying this he had buried a lance in a certain spot and concealed all trace of it. He exhorted them to fast and repent for three days, and on the fourth day he led them all to the spot with their soldiers and workmen,

who dug everywhere and found the lance as he had told them. Whereupon he cried "Rejoice! For victory is secure." So on the fifth day they left the city in groups of five or six. The Muslims said to Kerbogha: "You should go up to the city and kill them one by one as they come out; it is easy to pick them off now that they have split up." He replied: "No, wait until they have all come out and then we will kill them." He would not allow them to attack the enemy and when some Muslims killed a group of Franks, he went himself to forbid such behavior and prevent its recurrence. When all the Franks had come out and not one was left in Antioch, they began to attack strongly, and the Muslims turned and fled. This was Kerbogha's fault, first because he had treated the Muslims with such contempt and scorn, and second because he had prevented their killing the Franks. The Muslims were completely routed without striking a single blow or firing a single arrow... The only Muslims to stand firm were a detachment of warriors from the Holy Land, who fought to acquire merit in God's eyes and to seek martyrdom. The Franks killed them by the thousand and stripped their camp of food and possessions, equipment, horses and arms, with which they reequipped themselves.

## **The Franks Conquer Jerusalem**

Taj ad-Daula Tut sh was the Lord of Jerusalem but had given it as a fief to the Amir Suqman ibn Artuq, the Turcoman. When the Franks defeated the Turks at Antioch the massacre demoralized them, and the Egyptians, who saw that the Turkish armies were being weakened by desertion, besieged Jerusalem under the command of al-Afdal ibn Badr al-Jamali. Inside the city were Artuq's sons, Suqman and Ilghazi, their cousin Sunij and their nephew Yaquti. The Egyptians brought more than forty siege engines to attack Jerusalem and broke down the walls at several points. The inhabitants put up a defense, and the siege and fighting went on for more than six weeks. In the end the Egyptians forced the city to capitulate, in sha'b n 489. Suqman, Ilghazi and their friends were well treated by al-Afdal, who gave them large gifts of money and let them go free. They made for Damascus and then crossed the Euphrates. Suqman settled in Edessa and Ilghazi went on into Iraq. The Egyptian governor of Jerusalem was a certain Iftikhar ad-Daula, who was still there at the time of which we are speaking.

After their vain attempt to take Acre by siege, the Franks moved onto Jerusalem and besieged it for more than six weeks. They built two towers, one of which, near Sion, the Muslims burnt down, killing everyone inside it. It had scarcely ceased to burn before a messenger arrived to ask for help and to bring the news that the other side of the city had fallen. In fact Jerusalem was taken from the north on the morning of Friday 22, sha'bān 492. The population was put to the sword by the Franks, who pillaged the area for a week. A band of Muslims barricaded themselves into the Oratory of David and fought on for several days. They were granted their lives in return for surrendering. The Franks honored their word, and the group left by night for Ascalon. In the Masjid alAqsa the Franks slaughtered more than 70,000 people, among them a large number of Imams and Muslim scholars, devout and ascetic men who had left their homelands to live lives of pious seclusion in the Holy Place. The Franks stripped the Dome of the Rock of more than forty silver candelabra, each of them weighing 3,600 drams, and a great silver lamp weighing forty four Syrian pounds, as well as a hundred and fifty smaller silver candelabra and more than twenty gold ones, and a great deal more booty.

Refugees from Syria reached Baghdad in Ramadan, among them the qadi Abu Sa'd al Harawi. They told the Caliph's ministers a story that wrung their hearts and brought tears to their eyes. On Friday they went to the Cathedral Mosque and begged for help, weeping so that their hearers wept with them as they described the sufferings of the Muslims in that Holy City: the men killed, the women and children taken prisoner, the homes pillaged. Because of the terrible hardships they had suffered, they were allowed to break the fast.

It was the discord between the Muslim princes, as we shall describe, that enabled the Franks to overrun the country. Abu l-Muzaffar al-Abiwardi composed several poems on this subject, in one of which he says:

We have mingled blood with flowing tears, and there is no room left in us for pity?

To shed tears is a man's worst weapon when the swords stir up the embers of war.

Sons of Islam, behind you are battles in which heads rolled at your feet.

Dare you slumber in the blessed shade of safety, where life is  
as soft as an orchard flower?

How can the eye sleep between the lids at a time of disasters  
that would waken any sleeper?

While your Syrian brothers can only sleep on the backs of  
their chargers, or in vultures' bellies!

Must the foreigners feed on our ignominy, while you trail  
behind you the train of a pleasant life, like men whose world  
is at peace?

When blood has been spilt, when sweet girls must for shame  
hide their lovely faces in their hands!

When the white swords' points are red with blood, and the  
iron of the brown lances is stained with gore!

At the sound of sword hammering on lance young children's  
hair turns white.

This is war, and the man who shuns the whirlpool to save  
his life shall grind his teeth in penitence.

This is war, and the infidel's sword is naked in his hand,  
ready to be sheathed again in men's necks and skulls.

This is war, and he who lies in the tomb at Medina seems to  
raise his voice and cry:

"O sons of Hashim!

I see my people slow to raise the lance against the enemy: I  
see the Faith resting on feeble pillars.

For fear of death the Muslims are evading the fire of battle,  
refusing to believe that death will surely strike them."

Must the Arab champions then suffer with resignation,  
while the gallant Persians shut their eyes to their dishonor?